

The Silver Horde

By REX BEACH

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"The Barrier"

HARPER & BROTHERS

The breath of the wild north-west is in this great story of love and life and hate and death. Rex Beach and Jack London have revealed the hidden mysteries and romances of the Alaskan wastes as have no other authors, and in this stirring, gripping narrative is shown the best work of Mr. Beach's career. Boyd Emerson and his superhuman efforts to win a fortune for the woman he loved; Cherry Malotte, the captivating, energetic young woman who combated desperate men on the battlefield of their own choosing; Mildred Wayland, the imperious beauty and society favorite, whose hand was sought by bitter rivals who did not stop at murder; George Ball, the sturdy fisher hero, whose voice was like the roar of giant waves on a lee shore; "Fingerless" Fraser, whose quaint humor alone prevented him from going to jail, where he really belonged, and Willis Marsh, unprincipled intriguer and a betrayer of men and women—these are some of the characters and elements that make this story one of the greatest tales of adventure ever written.

CHAPTER I.

THE trail to Kalvik leads down from the northward mountains over the tundra which flanks the tide flats, then creeps on upon the salt ice of the river and across to the village.

A Greek church, a Russian school with a cossack priest presiding and about a hundred houses beside the cannery buildings make up the village. Early one December afternoon there entered upon this trail from the timbered hills far away to the northward a weary team of six dogs, driven by two men.

The travelers had been plodding sullenly hour after hour, dispirited by the weight of the storm. "Fingerless" Fraser broke trail, and Boyd Emerson drove.

"Another day like this and we'd both be snow blind," observed Emerson grimly as he bent to his task. "But it can't be far to the river now."

An hour later they dropped from the plain down through a gutterlike gully to the river, where they found a trail, glass hard beneath its downy covering. A cold breath sucked up from the sea. Ahead they saw the ragged ice upended by the tide. One branch led to the village, which they knew lay somewhere on the farther side, hidden by a mile or more of shifting snow.

The going here was so rough that both men leaped from their seats and ran beside the sled. They mounted a swelling ridge and rushed down to the level river ice beyond, but as they did so they heard a shivering creak on every side and saw water rising about the sled runners. Emerson shouted, the dogs leaped, but with a crash the ice gave way, and for a moment the water closed over him. "Fingerless" Fraser broke through in turn, gasping as the icy water rose to his armpits.

Each man aimed to secure an independent footing, but the efforts of all only enlarged the pool. Emerson shouted:

"Cut the team loose, quick!" But the other spat out a mouthful of salt water and spluttered:

"I—I can't swim!"

Whereupon the first speaker half swam himself through the slush to the forward end of the sled and, seeking out the sheath knife from beneath his parka, cut the harness of the two animals. Once free they scrambled to safety and rolled in the dry snow.

Emerson next attempted to lift the nose of the sled up on the ice, shouting at the remainder of the team to pull, but they only wagged their tails and whined. Each time he tried to lift the sled he crashed through fresh ice, finally bearing the next pair of dogs with him and then the two animals in the lead. All of them became hopelessly entangled.

Suddenly rang out a sharp command uttered in a new voice. Out of the snow fog from the direction in which they were headed broke a team, running full and free. Emerson marvelled at the outfit, having never seen the like in all his travels through the north, for each animal of the twelve stood hip high to a tall man, and they were like wolves of one pack, gray and gaunt and wicked. A tall Indian runner left the team and headed swiftly for the scene of the accident. The man ran forward till he neared the edge of the opening where the tide had caused the does to separate; then, flattening his body on the ice, he crawled out cautiously and

seized the lead dog. Carefully he wormed his way backward to security. It had been a ticklish operation, requiring nice skill and dexterity, but now that his footing was sure the runner exerted his whole strength, and as the dogs scratched and tore for a firm foothold the sled came crunching closer and closer through the half inch skin of ice. Then he reached down and dragged Emerson out, dripping

and nerveless from his immersion. Together they rescued the outfit.

The person in the sled had watched them silently, but now spoke in a strange patois, and the breed gave voice to her words, for it was a woman.

"One mile you go—white man house. Go quick—you freeze."

"Ain't you got no dry clothes? Our stuff is soaked."

Again the Indian translated some words from the girl.

"No. You hurry and no stop here. We go quick over yonder. No can stop at all."

He hurried back to his mistress, cried once to the pack of gray dogs, "Oonah!" and they were off as if in chase.

As they dashed past both white men had one fleeting glimpse of a woman's face beneath a furred hood, and then it was gone.

"Did you see?" Fraser ejaculated. "Good Lord! It's a woman—a blond woman!"

"Nonsense! She must be a breed," said Emerson.

"Breeds don't have yellow hair!" declared the other.

Swiftly they bent in the free dogs and lashed the team to a run. They felt the chill of death in their bones, and instead of riding they ran with the sled till their blood beat painfully.

Their outer coverings were like shells, their underclothes were soaked, and although their going was difficult and clumsy they dared not stop, for this is the extremest peril of the north.

They swung over the river bank and into the midst of great rambling frame buildings. Their trail led them to a high banked cabin. Another mile would have meant disaster.

"Rout out the owner and tell him we're wet," said Emerson. "I'll free the dogs."

Before he could reach the cabin the door opened and Fraser appeared, a strange, dazed look on his face. He was followed by a large man of sullen countenance.

"It's no use," Fraser said. "We can't go in."

"What's wrong? Somebody sick?"

"I don't know what's the matter. This man just says 'nix,' that's all."

The fellow growled, "Yass; Ay got no room."

"But you don't understand," said Emerson. "We're wet. We broke through the ice. Never mind the room. We'll get along somehow."

"You can't come in here. You find another house 'twee mile furder."

The traveler pushed forward. Involuntarily the watchman drew back, whereupon the unwelcome visitor crowded past, jostling his inhospitable host roughly. Emerson's quick action gained him entrance, and Fraser followed behind into the living room, where a flat nosed squaw withdrew before them. The young man addressed her peremptorily:

"Punch up that fire and get us something to eat, quick!"

Sour obedience followed. Fraser had been watching the fellow and now remarked to his companion:

"Say, what ails that ginney?"

The assumption of good nature fell away from Boyd Emerson as he replied:

"I never knew anybody to refuse shelter to freezing men before."

The watchman reappeared. "You can't stop here!" he said. "Ay got orders. By Yingo, Ay throw you out!"

He stooped and gathered up the garments nearest him, then stepped toward the outer door, but before he could make good his threat Emerson whirled like a cat, his deep set eyes dark with sudden fury, and seized his host by the nape of the neck. He jerked him back so roughly that the wet clothes dapped to the floor in four directions, whereat the Scandinavian let forth a bellow, but Emerson struck him heavily on the jaw with his open hand, then hurried him backward into the room so violently that he reeled, and, his legs colliding with a bench, he fell against the wall. His assailant stepped in and throttled him, beating his head violently against the logs. Emerson, stepping back, spoke in a quivering voice which Fraser had never heard before:

"I'm just playing with you now. I don't want to hurt you."

"Get out of my house! Ay got orders!" cried the watchman and made for him again.

Emerson dragged him to his own doornail, jerked the door open and kicked him out into the snow, then barred the entrance and returned to the warmth of the logs, his face convulsed and his lips working.

When the slatternly woman had slunk forth and was busied at the stove Emerson observed mutteringly:

"I wonder what possessed that fellow to act as he did."

"Is there a roadhouse near by?" "Try the next place below," said the watchman hurriedly, slamming the door in their faces and bolting it. At the next stop they encountered the same gruff show of inhospitality. "I'll make one more try," said Emerson between his teeth gratingly. "If



EMERSON SEIZED HIS HOST BY THE NAPE OF THE NECK.

that doesn't succeed then I'll take possession again."

A mile farther on they drew up before a white pile surmounted by a dimly discerned Greek cross, but their signals awakened no response.

"Gone!" They wasted no words when, for the fourth time their eyes caught the welcome sight of a shining radiance in the gloom.

"Unhitch!" ordered Emerson doggedly as he began to untie the ropes of the sled. He shouldered the sleeping bags and made toward the light that filtered through the crusted windows, followed by Fraser similarly burdened.

But as they approached they saw at once that this was no cannery; it looked more like a roadhouse or trading post. Behind and connected with it by a covered hall or passageway crouched another squat building of the same character, its roof piled thick with a mass of snow, its windows glowing.

They mounted the steps of the high building and without knocking flung the door open, entering. With a sharp exclamation at Indian woman regarded them round eyed.

"We're all right this time," observed Emerson. "It's a store." Then to the woman he said briefly, "We want a bed and something to eat."

On every side the walls were shelved with merchandise, while the counter carried a supply of clothing and skins. "What you want?" demanded the squaw.

Boyd and Fraser, divesting themselves of their furs, noticed that she was little more than a girl—a native undoubtedly.

"Food! Sleep!" Boyd replied. "You can't stop here," the girl asserted firmly.

"Oh, yes, we can," said Emerson. The squaw called, "Constantine!"

The tall figure of a man emerged, advancing swiftly.

It was the copper hued native who had rescued them from the river earlier in the day. The Indian girl broke into a torrent of excited volubility.

"You no stop here," said Constantine. Making toward the outer door, he flung it open.

"We've come a long way and we're tired," Emerson argued. He faced the Indian with his back to the stove, his voice taking on a determined note.

"We won't leave here until we are ready. Now tell your 'klootch' to get us some supper, quick!"

A soft voice from the rear of the room halted the advancing Indian. "Constantine," it said.

The travelers whirled to see, standing out in relief against the darkness of the passage whence the Indian had just come a few seconds before, the golden haired girl of the storm to whom they had been indebted for their rescue. She advanced, smiling pleasantly.

"These men no stop here!" cried Constantine violently.

"I—I beg pardon," began Emerson. "We didn't intend to take forcible possession, but we're played out—we've been denied shelter everywhere—we feel desperate!"

She addressed the Indian girl in Aleut and signaled to Constantine, at which the two natives retired.

"We're glad of an opportunity to thank you for your timely service this afternoon," said Emerson.

"Oh, that was nothing. I've been expecting you hourly. You see, Constantine's little brother has the measles, and I had to get to him before the natives could give the poor little fellow a Russian bath and then stand him out in the snow. They have only one treatment for all diseases."

"If your—er—father—" The girl shook her head.

"Then your husband—I should like to arrange with him to hire lodgings for a few days. The matter of money—"

Again she came to his rescue. "I am the man of the house. I'm boss here. You are quite welcome to stay as long as you wish. Constantine objects to my hospitality and treats all strangers alike, fearing they may be company men."

"We throw a Swede out on his neck," declared Fraser, swelling with conscious importance, "and I guess he's 'crabbed' us with the other square-heads."

"Oh, no! They have instructions not to harbor any travelers. It's as much as his job is worth for any of them to entertain you. Now, won't you make yourselves at home while Constantine attends to your dogs? Dinner will soon be ready."

He murmured "Gladly" and then lost himself in wonder at this well-gowned girl living amid such surroundings. Undenially pretty, graceful in her movements, bearing herself with certainty and poise, who was she? Where did she come from? And what in the world was she doing here?

He became aware that "Fingerless" Fraser was making the introductions. "This is Mr. Emerson. My name is French. I'm one of the Virgiles Franches, you know. Perhaps you have heard of them. No! Well, they're the real thing."

Emerson forestalled her acknowledgment by breaking in roughly:

"His name isn't French at all, madam; it's Fraser—'Fingerless' Fraser. He's an utterly worthless rogue and absolutely unreliable, so far as I can learn. I picked him up on the ice in Norton sound with a marshal at his heels."

"That marshal wasn't after me," stoutly denied Fraser, quite unabashed. "Why, he's a friend of mine—we're regular chums. Everybody knows that. He wanted to give me some papers to take outside, that's all."

Boyd shrugged his shoulders indifferently:

"Warrants!"

The hostess, greatly amused, prevented any further argument by saying:

"I suppose you are bound for the States?"

"Yes. We intend to catch the mail boat at Katnal. I am taking Fraser along for company. It's hard traveling alone in a strange country. He's a nuisance, but he's rather amusing at times."

"I certainly am," agreed that cheerful person, now fully at his ease. By and by the girl rose, and after showing them to a room she excused herself on the score of having to see to the dinner. When she had withdrawn "Fingerless" Fraser pursed his thin lips into a noiseless whistle, then observed:

"Well, I'll be—cursed!"

CHAPTER II.

"WHO is she?" asked Emerson. "You heard, didn't you? She's Miss Malotte, and she's certainly some considerable lady," answered the crook.

"Yes, but who is she? What does this mean?" Emerson pointed to the provisions and fittings about them. "What is she doing here alone?"

"Maybe you'd better ask her yourself," said Fraser.

For the first time in their brief acquaintance Emerson detected a strange note in the rogue's voice.

The Indian girl summoned them, and they followed her through the long passageway into the other house, where, to their utter astonishment, they seemed to step out of the frontier and into the heart of civilization. They found a tiny dining room perfectly appointed, in the center of which, wonder of wonders, was a round table gleaming like a deep mahogany pool, upon the surface of which floated gauzy hand worked napery, glistening silver and sparkling crystal, the dark polish of the wood reflecting the light from shaded candles. It held a delicately figured service of blue and gold, while the selection of thin stemmed glasses all in rows indicated the character of the entertainment that awaited them. The men's eyes were too busy with the unaccustomed sight to note details carefully, but they felt soft carpet beneath their feet and observed that the walls were smooth and harmoniously papered.

"This is marvelous," murmured Emerson. "I'm afraid we're not in keeping."

"Indeed you are," said the girl, "and I am delighted to have somebody to talk to. It's very lonesome here."

"This is certainly a swell place," Fraser remarked. "How did you do it?"

"I brought my things with me from Nome."

"Nome!" ejaculated Emerson quickly. "Yes."

"Why, I've been in Nome ever since the camp was discovered. It's strange we never met."

"I didn't stay there very long; I went back to Dawson."

Again he fancied the girl's eyes held a vague challenge, but he could not be sure, for she sent him and then gave some instructions to the Aleut girl, Boyd, becoming absorbed in his own thoughts, grew more silent as the signs of refinement and civilization about him revived memories long stifled. This was not the effect for which the girl had striven.

Her younger guest's tactlessness, which grew as the dinner progressed, pleased her, so at the first opportunity she bent her efforts toward rallying him. He answered politely, but she was powerless to shake off his mood.

At last he spoke:

"You said those watchmen have instructions not to harbor travelers. Why is that?"

"It is the policy of the companies. They are afraid somebody will discover gold around here. You see, this is the greatest salmon river in the world. The 'run' is tremendous and seems to be unending; hence the cannery people wish to keep it all to themselves."

"I don't quite understand—"

"It is simple enough. Kalvik is so isolated and the fishing season is so short that the companies have to send their crews in from the States and take them out again every summer. Now, if gold were discovered here, about the fishermen would all quit and follow the 'strike,' which would mean the ruin of the river's catch and the loss of many hundreds of thousands of dollars. Why, this village would become a city in no time if such a thing were to happen. The whole region would fill up with miners, and not only would labor conditions be entirely upset for years, but the eyes of the world, being turned this way, other people might go into the fishing business and create a competition which would both influence prices and deplete the supply of fish in the Kalvik river. So, you see, there are many reasons why this region is forbidden to miners. You couldn't buy a pound of food nor get a night's lodging here for a king's ransom. The watchmen's jobs depend upon their unbroken bond of inhospitality, and the Indians dare not sell you anything, not even a dogfish, under penalty of starvation, for they are dependent upon the companies' stores."

"So that is why you have established a trading post of your own?"

"Oh, dear, no. This isn't a store."

This food is for my men." "Your men?" "Yes. I have a crew out in the hills on a grub stake. This is our cache. While they prospect for gold I stand guard over the provisions."

Fraser chuckled softly. "Then you are bucking the salmon trust?"

"After a fashion, yes. I knew this country had never been gone over, so I staked six men, chartered a schooner and came down here from Nome in the early spring. We stood off the watchman, and when the supply ships arrived we had these houses completed, and my men were out in the hills where it was hard to follow them. I stayed behind and stood the brunt of things."

"But surely they didn't undertake to injure you?" said Emerson, now thoroughly interested in this extraordinary young woman.

"Oh, didn't they!" she answered, with a peculiar laugh. "You don't appreciate the character of these people. There is no real code of financial morality, and the battle for dollars is the bitterest of all contests. Of course, being a woman, they couldn't very well attack me personally, but they tried everything except physical violence, and I don't know how long they will refrain from that. These plants are owned separately, but they operate under an agreement with one man at the head. His name is Marsh—Willis Marsh—and of course he's not my friend."

"Sort of 'united we stand, divided we fall'?"

"Exactly. That spreads the responsibility and seems to leave nobody guilty for his evil deeds. The first thing they did was to sink my schooner. In the morning you will see her spars sticking up through the ice out in front there. One of their tugs 'accidentally' ran her down, although she was at anchor half 300 feet inside the channel line. Then Marsh actually had the effrontery to come here personally and demand damages for the injury to his towboat, falsely claiming

she was the place!"

A woman's face with some meaningless name beneath filled each page. Along the top ran the heading, "Famous American Beauties." So it was a woman! She skipped backward and forward among the pages for further possible enlightenment, but there was no article accompanying the pictures. It was merely an illustrated section devoted to the photographs of prominent actresses and society women, most of whom she had never heard of, though here and there she saw a name that was familiar. In the center was that tantalizingly clean cut edge which had subtracted a face from the gallery—a face which she wanted very much to see.

She shrugged her shoulders carelessly. Then, in a sudden access of fury, she flung the mutilated magazine viciously into a far corner of the room.

The travelers slept late on the following morning, for the weariness of the week was upon them, and the little bank room they occupied adjoined the main building and was dark. When they came forth they found Chakawana in the store and a few moments later were called to breakfast.

"Where is your mistress?" inquired Boyd.

"She go see my sick broder," said the Indian girl, recalling Cherry's mention of the child ill with measles. "She all the time give medicine to Aleut babies." Chakawana continued, "all the time give, give, give something. Indian people love her."

They were still talking when they heard the jingle of many bells, and the door burst open to admit Cherry, who came with a rush of youth and health as fresh as the bracing air that followed her. The cold had reddened her cheeks and quickened her eyes.

"Good morning, gentlemen!" she cried, removing the white fur hood which gave a setting to her sparkling eyes and teeth. "Oh, but it's a glorious morning! We did the five miles from the village in seventeen minutes."

"And how is your measly patient?" asked Fraser.

"He's doing well, thank you." She stepped to the door to admit Chakawana, who had evidently hurried around from the other house and now came in, bareheaded and heedless of the cold, bearing a bundle clasped to her breast. "I brought the little fellow home with me. See!"

"I dare say Kalvik is rather lively during the summer season," Emerson remarked to Cherry later in the day.

"Yes; the ships arrive in May, and the fish begin to run in July. After 'hat nobody sleeps."

"It must be rather interesting."

"It is more than that; it is inspiring. Why, the story of the salmon is an epic in itself. You know they live a cycle of four years, no more, always returning to the waters of their nativity to die. And I have heard it said that during one of those four years they disappear, no one knows where, reappearing out of the mysterious depths of the sea as if at a signal. They come by the legion, in countless scores of thousands, and when once they have tasted the waters of their birth they never touch food again, nor cease their onward rush until they become bruised and battered wrecks, drifting down from the spawning beds. When the call of nature is answered and the spawn is laid they die. They never seek the salt sea again, but carpet the rivers with their bones. When they feel the homing impulse they come from the remotest depths, heading unerringly for the particular parent stream whence they originated. If sand bars should block their course in dry seasons or obstacles intercept them they will hurl themselves out of the water in an endeavor to get across. They may disregard a thousand rivers one by one, but when they finally taste the sweet currents which flow from their birthplaces their whole nature changes, and even their physical features alter. They grow thin, and the head takes on the sinister curve of the praying bird."

"Why, you just ought to witness the run." These empty waters become suddenly crowded, and the fish come in a great silver horde, which races up, up, up toward death and obliteration. They come with the violence of a summer storm; like a prodigious, gleaming army they swarm and bend forward, eager, undeviating, one purposed. It's quite impossible to describe it, this great silver horde. They are entirely defenseless, of course, and almost every living thing preys upon them. The birds congregate in millions, the four footed beasts come down from the hills, the Apaches of the sea harry them in dense droves, and even man appears from distant coasts to take his toll, but still they press bravely on. The clank of machinery makes the hills rumble; the hiss of steam and the sighs of the soldering furnaces are like the complaint of some giant overgorging himself."

"How long does it all last?"

"Only about six weeks; then the furnace fires die out, the ships are loaded, the men go to sleep, after which Kalvik sags back into its ten months' coma, becoming, as you see it now, a dead, deserted village, shunned by man."

"But I don't see how those huge plants can pay for their upkeep with such a short run."

"Well, they do, and, what's more, they pay tremendously, sometimes 100 per cent a year or more."

"Two years ago a ship sailed into port in early May loaded with an army of men with machinery, lumber, coal, and so forth. They landed, built the plant and had it ready to operate by the time the run started. They made their catch and sailed away again in August with enough salmon in the hold to pay twice over for the whole thing. Willis Marsh did even better than that the year before, but of course the price of fish was high then. Next season will be another big year."

"How is that?"

"Every fourth season the run is large; nobody knows why. Every time there is a presidential election the fish are shy and very scarce; that lifts prices. Every year in which a president of the United States is inaugurated they are plentiful."

Emerson rose.

"I had no idea there were such profits in the fisheries up here."

"Nobody knows it outside of those interested. The Kalvik river is the most wonderful salmon river in the world, for it has never failed once. That's why the companies guard it so jealously."

It was evident that the young man was vitally interested now.

"What does it cost to install and operate a cannery for the first season?"

"About \$200,000, I am told. But I believe one can mortgage his catch or borrow money on it from the banks, and so not have to carry the full burden."

"What's to prevent me from going into the business?"

"Several things. Have you the money?"

"Possibly. What else?"

"A site."

"That ought to be easy."

Cherry laughed. "On the contrary, a suitable cannery site is very hard to get, because there are natural conditions necessary, fresh flowing water for one, and, furthermore, because the companies have taken them all up."

"Ah! I see." The light died out of Emerson's eyes; the eagerness left his voice. He flung himself dejectedly into a chair by the fire, moodily watching the flames licking the burning logs. All at once he gripped the arms of his chair and muttered through set jaws, "God, I'd like to take one more chance."

CHAPTER III.

THE girl darted a swift look at Boyd, but he fell to brooding again, evidently insensible to her presence. At length he stirred himself to ask:

"Can I hire a guide hereabout? We'll have to be going on in a day or so."

"Constantine will get you one. I suppose, of course, you will avoid the Katnal pass?"

"Avoid it? Why?"

"It's dangerous, and nobody travels it except in the direst emergency. It's much the shortest route